

Preface

This book began its life as a doctoral dissertation at the Department of Art History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I was afforded the time and intellectual freedom to think dwell on early modern images of flesh and pleasure in the work of Peter Paul Rubens. Over the years, as the project accompanied me through post-doctoral research, teaching, and family life, it has been reworked into the present volume, which offers a substantially revised argument, expanded case studies, and a broader engagement with questions of embodiment, intimacy, and politics in early modern visual culture.

The research underpinning this study was shaped in archives, libraries, and print cabinets across Europe, most notably in Kassel, Munich, Dresden, Brussels, Antwerp, and Amsterdam. Encounters with paintings, drawings, and prints in the Rubenshuis, the Rijksmuseum, the Royal Library of Belgium, and the Dresden Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, among others, were crucial in transforming the project from a dissertation into a book attentive to the material and affective dimensions of Rubens's art. Conversations with curators, archivists, and fellow researchers in these settings continually challenged me to refine the visual and historical questions that animate the chapters that follow.

This book has also taken shape in dialogue with various academic communities. Presenting early versions of its arguments at conferences and workshops—from meetings on art and social justice to symposia on sexuality, intimacy, and early modern art—helped me situate Rubens's images of flesh within wider debates about the body, desire, and visual culture. Undergraduate and graduate courses on early modern art, the body, and Rubens at Tel Aviv University that I taught have provided an equally important arena for testing ideas, as discussions with students sharpened my sense of what is at stake in rethinking Rubens's sensual imagery for contemporary readers.

While the Acknowledgments detail my many debts to institutions, colleagues, friends, and family, this preface marks two forms of gratitude woven through the book's argument. The first is to my teachers and mentors, whose examples of rigorous yet imaginative art history encouraged me to hold together close looking, theoretical ambition, and an insistence on historical specificity; The second is to my fam-

ily—Dror, Anna, and Yotam—as well as to my parents, Terry and Simon Benninga, especially my late father, Simon, whose model of committed scholarship and joyful engagement with life profoundly shaped the way this book approaches pleasure as an ethical, intellectual, and everyday concern.